

## PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

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| Episode #: | 6   |
| Guest:     | Shannon Wiltsey-Stirman, PhD                            |
| Title:     | #6: Treatments for PTSD 3: Cognitive Processing Therapy |

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a Clinical Psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

In this episode, we continue our discussion of PTSD treatments that work. Today I'll be talking with Dr. Shannon Wiltsey-Stirman about Cognitive Processing Therapy. Dr. Wiltsey-Stirman is a Clinical Psychologist and Implementation Scientist at the National Center for PTSD. She's also an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Hello and welcome, Dr. Wiltsey-Stirman.

Shannon:

Hi, thank you for having me.

Pearl:

It's great to have you on the podcast. Can you start by just telling us a little bit about Cognitive Processing Therapy or CPT, and maybe how it's different from other therapies that our listeners might be familiar with?

Shannon:

CPT is a trauma-focused treatment for PTSD that helps provide a way for people to understand why they've had some trouble recovering from the traumatic events that have happened to them, as well as how the symptoms of PTSD affect their daily life. And the goal is really to identify how traumatic experiences change the way look at themselves and they look at the world. And so an important piece of the treatment is to look at what people have been saying to themselves that keep them stuck in the PTSD and get in the way of their recovery. And we do that in a number of ways. We introduce and teach people some skills that they can use in their everyday life when they notice themselves feeling stuck. By doing that, we help them get a different perspective on what happened to them. So instead of maybe beating themselves up about something that they did or didn't do that they think contributed to what happened, they might get a better sense of what was really going on, why they weren't able to do something that they're now thinking they should have done, and how the trauma unfolded so that they can put into the context and process the memory. And it changes the way that they react when they experience trauma reminders. So that the trauma doesn't have the same hold on them that it used to.

Pearl:

And it sounds like the person has to be really ready to talk about their trauma in order to participate in CPT, if I'm understanding correctly. Does, does somebody have to talk specifically about what happened to them and the trauma or traumas they experienced in order for this to be successful?

Shannon:

They need to be at a point where they're willing to break the cycle of avoidance that we know is so big of a part of PTSD. And that means that although they don't have to talk about what happened to them over and over again, they do need to be willing to approach those memories of the trauma and to sort of think about them with their therapist.

Pearl:

The way you're describing the therapy, it sounds really in depth and comprehensive. And I'm just wondering what is typically, in your experience, going on in the life of somebody who chooses to participate in CPT. What makes them motivated to give it a try?

Shannon:

I think people are motivated to do CPT or other trauma-focused therapies when they realize that what they're doing isn't really working anymore for them. And that they're not living the kind of life they want, they're not having the relationships they want. And CPT gives people the tools by helping them recognize those patterns of avoidance and do something different when they start to notice that they're feeling triggered or that trauma memories are coming up. So they decide to really work with them in a more focused way. And CPT is a treatment where people can start to notice the benefits after just a few weeks. So this isn't something that has to go on and on and on for a really long time before people see the benefits.

Pearl:

I'm wondering what that looks like. How do people know that the treatment is working? How does their life change?

Shannon:

People can notice themselves doing things differently. And they notice themselves reacting differently to traumatic memories and catching themselves when they're saying things to themselves about the trauma that maybe keep them stuck in feelings of guilt or shame. And a lot of times, I think what people start to notice is that when they are no longer avoiding the memory of the trauma, new information that they hadn't really considered comes into play, and they can take a closer look at what they've been saying them to themselves. And as they're able to take a closer look, they notice some relief. They notice that they can have memories of the trauma that don't grip them in the same way. I think people also notice that they are no longer avoiding some of the things that they used to avoid, and that they're doing things that maybe they haven't done in a long time.

Pearl:

It sounds like it's a really potentially powerful treatment. And what do we know about how effective it is?

Shannon:

CPT is a treatment that's got a lot of research behind it. So we've seen studies of CPT for people who've experienced traumatic events like physical or sexual abuse or assault, accidents, combat. We've seen CPT work for people who are refugees. We've seen it work for folks who have jobs where they're exposed to trauma. Different formats of CPT have also been tested. And so we know that it's a pretty

flexible treatment and we've seen effectiveness for a lot of different people who have experienced many, many different types of traumas.

Pearl:

That's great. It's wonderful to hear that there's so much research behind CPT and that it is working for many people. What would you say to somebody who's interested in trying out CPT, but maybe they're a little bit reluctant or hesitant?

Shannon:

You can talk with therapists about whether it's a good fit for you, especially therapists who have been trained in CPT. And one way to find those therapists is if you're at the VA, there are therapists in every facility who have been trained in CPT. If you don't receive care through the VA, there is a registry of trained therapists on a website [CPTforptsd.com](http://CPTforptsd.com). There are also ways to watch videos to get more information about CPT so that you can learn a little bit more about whether it's a good fit for you. There are videos on the National Center for PTSD website. I would say talking with people and getting more information is a great way to try to figure out if it's a good fit. If you seek treatment, you can get started and really give it a try and try to work at it consistently. And what we see is when people do work at it consistently, even if it's for just a few minutes a day, that you can start to see some progress. The good news though, is that there are a number of treatments that can be effective for PTSD. So I always encourage people to not give up hope. And that it's a matter of finding a treatment that feels like a good fit for you at the time in your life when you're really ready to work on recovery from PTSD.

Pearl:

Thank you. I'm sure our listeners really appreciate those words of encouragement. How are clinicians using technology to make it easier to do CPT?

Shannon:

So there is an app called CPT Coach that contains all of the exercises and skills that we're trying to support people in learning. And the app allows people to use those skills really at any time. So when people find themselves in a moment where maybe they're feeling stuck, maybe they're feeling triggered by something, or maybe they're just noticing, 'oh, that same pattern is coming up for me again,' they can pull out their phone and walk through one of the exercises and practice one of the skills right there in the moment without anybody knowing what they're doing. So rather than pulling out a worksheet and filling it out or having to call their therapist, they can work right then and there on something that's giving them a hard time or keeping them stuck. And then also they can send those exercises to their therapist. The treatment isn't just that hour in the room that they spend with their therapist every week, but that it's something they can take out into their lives so that they can practice those skills and use them whenever they need them. One of the reasons that these therapies are short term is that we want people to get to a point where they're able to use that the tools and skills to be able to help themselves in the moment. And of course, sometimes folks do need to continue therapy, or they might need to check back in with a therapist, but we want people to feel like they have what they need in their day-to-day life, to be able to overcome these challenges that they face. And the app is a really wonderful way to do that. And it helps people get the most that they can out of treatment.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. Wiltsey-Stirman for joining us today and explaining CPT in plain language. It's just so encouraging that PTSD treatment has come so far and that there are treatments like CPT that really do work.

Shannon:

Thanks so much for having me, it was really great to be able to talk with you about this today.

Pearl:

For anyone who wants to learn even more about Cognitive Processing therapy, check out the National Center for PTSD website at [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov). For anyone providing or receiving Cognitive Processing Therapy, the mobile app CPT Coach is free to download on any smartphone or tablet. Check it out.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Look out for new episodes, which are released every other week. Thank you for joining us.